

# 2,303 YEARS AGO

286 BC

*On the banks of the Two Rivers,  
Only weeds now grow.  
The cities are razed to ruin.  
The land's fate cannot be changed.  
Who can overturn it?*

— The Lament for Shumér



“In those days, in those faraway days; in those years, in those long-ago years...” So began many old poems in the Land Between the Rivers.

Someday, thought Zaidu, *a poet might sing the same of this very night.*

He trudged alone through narrow streets between mud-daubed walls, along alleys framed with rotting timber, his sandaled feet crunching softly on the overgrown weeds and hard-packed dirt. *But Dipti would laugh at me for saying such a thing, he*

mused, ducking through the low doorway of his favorite tavern, tucking his wood stylus-box into his tunic's rough-spun sash.

Once his eyes adjusted to the tavern's lamp-lit interior, he caught sight of his friend sitting at a corner table, polishing off the dregs of foamy sweet-beer from a clay mug, waving for the barmaid to bring him another.

"Dipti!" he cried, wrapping his fellow scribe in a rough hug, kissing one cheek and the other. "Where've you been lately?" His eyes widened in mock concern. "Have you forgotten where we live?"

"Yes, Zaidu, that's exactly what's happened," Dipti replied drily, squeezing back into the corner behind the table. "Truth is, I've just been so damned busy at Master—*gah!*" He'd knocked his stylus-box to the floor, scattering pens and writing-reeds across the sawdust.

"Ah, so *that's* why they call you Dipti Steady-Hands," said Zaidu, bending to help his friend gather his styluses and return them to the box.

"Steady enough to snap your neck," Dipti sighed, holding out the box for Zaidu to return a handful of pens.

Grinning, Zaidu muttered his favorite Elline curse. "*Metrókoítes.*"

"Did you just—" Dipti's jaw dropped in a parody of outrage. "Did you just say I... fornicate with my mother, in Elline common-tongue?"

"You? Never," Zaidu replied. "I was talking of our friend here." He gestured at the cramped corner next to the table they'd secured, where a drunkard in a rough wool tunic slouched, snoring raucously, his meaty head on his chest.

Dipti wrinkled his nose as he squeezed back onto his stool in the corner. "At least he kept this table clear for us."

"He's keeping the beer away, too," Zaidu said, waving to get the barmaid's attention. The girl ignored him, rushing from table to table, smiling distractedly at the neighborhood bricklayers, carpenters, sandal-makers, rat-killers, and barbers, setting

mugs of fresh, foaming sweet-beer before them, sloshing foam onto the stained wood.

"You know," Dipti said, "Master Izdubar has us speaking Elline common-tongue in his work chambers now. He says we must become—*ahem*—'fluent in our rulers' tongue.'" He enunciated each word, imitating the master's archaic accent.

"Gods, what an ugly language it is," Zaidu sighed. "Why can't they call a house *beytheyn*, as we do? *Oikos* sounds like a pig. *Oik oik*."

"And their word for 'fish': *ikhthys*." Dipti gagged theatrically.

"Gibberish! Sounds like you've got something caught in your throat."

Dipti shot Zaidu a warning glare. "I keep telling you, tone it down with the anti-Elline talk. They speak common-tongue in the throne room now. One of these days a soldier's going to overhear..." He glanced around the tavern nervously but saw no soldiers.

"Gibberish," Zaidu repeated. "Just how you'd expect illiterate war-grunts to talk. Call themselves kings of our city, and name it *Babylon*. What kind of word is that? This is *Babili*. It's always been *Babili*."

"Master Izdubar says their *Elláda* is—" Dipti imitated the master's pompous voice again: "—filled with mighty cities and holy temples of marble, nearly as impressive as our own."

Zaidu snorted. "So *they* say. Pour a few beers into any man and he'll spin you tales of his homeland."

"And, oh, the tales these Ellines spin." Dipti peered into his empty mug, and frowned. "They claim to have perfected the arts of astrology and poetry. Even mathematics. And painting, too. I once heard an Elline artist brag of painting grapes that looked so real, birds flew down to peck them."

"As if that were the purpose of art. To paint realistic fruit." Zaidu rolled his eyes. He waved at the barmaid again, more energetically this time, but she was busy with a table of raucous dockworkers, and didn't see him. He shook his head and turned back to Dipti.

“Master Izdubar’s mind must be warping with old age,” he continued, sighing. “I mean, think about what he’s telling you. How could that be? We’ve been developing tables for multiplication and the movements of the stars for hundreds of years.”

“And poetry,” Dipti replied. “How could that possibly—?”

“Our poetry’s been refined over millennia, Dipti. All the way back to ancient Shumér, before the Flood.”

“I know. I sat in those history classes, too, remember?”

“How could I forget?” Zaidu rolled his eyes. “Master Shamas loved that whip-rod, didn’t he? Remember how he yelled? ‘Your father will thank me for this!’”

“That horrid reedy voice of his. ‘This is what your father pays me for!’ *Whack! Whack!*”

Zaidu groaned. “If we forgot one line of a poem, we’d be sleeping on our stomachs that night.”

“Don’t remind me.” Dipti shivered.

“But really,” Zaidu went on, “how could the Ellines write anything like the great Shuméru epics? *Uruba kienedibe mir insi*—‘A tempest has filled the dancing of the city.’ *Kurgulgul ude a ba’esi*—‘Devastatrix of the lands, you are lent wings by the storm.’ Can an Elline poet write like that?”

Dipti snorted. “You really love those old Shuméru poems, don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” Zaidu said. “No one writes like that anymore. I don’t think anyone ever will.”

“Because no one’s spoken Shuméru for a thousand years! What are you going to do, recite that to the barmaid? ‘*Kurgulgul*.’ She’ll think you’ve lost your mind.”

As if on cue, the barmaid chose that moment to appear at their table at last, carrying two clay mugs. As she set them on the table, Zaidu looked up into her eyes and said, “*Saibbaza aba itenten, kiag*.”

She looked at him as if he’d gone mad. Then she laughed. “What does that mean?”

Zaidu made a show of pouting. Dipti covered his mouth, shaking with suppressed laughter.

“Don’t laugh,” Zaidu said. “It’s Shuméru. It means, ‘Who can temper your raging heart, my love?’”

She raised her eyebrows and grinned. “You speak Shuméru?”

“Of course! It’s the most beautiful language that ever was.”

“I thought only priests spoke it—folk in temples,” she said.

“That is where they speak it,” said Dipti. “Except my friend here thinks it should be spoken in taverns, too.”

“I hear it’s almost impossible to learn,” she said.

“The grammar is complicated, it’s true,” said Zaidu. “But it’s so worth it, for the beautiful things you’ll read. *A single glance from you shakes the hearts of mountains. Like a wild bull whose horns pierce the heavens—*” He stopped, his gaze falling to the beer in his mug.

For a long silent moment, he was certain he’d made an utter fool of himself.

But then, in a soft voice, she spoke. “No, keep going,” she said. “Please.”

He looked up and watched a smile spread across her lips. Something in her eyes made his heart hum and made him want to tell her every line of poetry he knew.

“*In Dilmun’s garden did he lay her down,*” he recited, trying to keep the tremble out of his voice. “*Upon that untouched land where never a furrow had been plowed.*”

She laughed softly, covering her mouth.

He felt as if he might melt right through the floor.

“I could teach you,” he said. “If you like.”

“First I’d have to learn to read,” she said, “and I’ve heard that’s hard enough.”

“It takes a few years,” Dipti broke in. “And oh so many whippings.”

“How awful!” she said. “I’m too old to put up with being whipped, really, but my father—”

“Arwia!” The proprietor, a balding, middle-aged man behind the bar, tore her attention away. “What in the Seven Stars do you think you’re doing, besides wasting our customers’

time? I swear before all the Gods, you're the laziest daughter I ever had!" He howled, tearing at his beard theatrically.

She smiled at Zaidu and rolled her eyes, then dashed off to refill other patrons' mugs.

"I didn't know her name was Arwia," said Zaidu, smiling as if surfacing from a dream.

"How could you not know that?" said Dipti. "We come here every week, and you never asked her?"

"Did you?"

"Of course I did!" Dipti barked a laugh. "The first night we came here, what, three years ago now."

Zaidu shrugged. "After a certain point, I got too embarrassed to ask."

Dipti raised his eyebrows. "Frankly, I'm amazed the word 'embarrassed' even exists in your vocabulary, Zaidu. Come on, finish your drink and let's go home."

"I want to stay," said Zaidu. "I want to talk to Arwia."

"Then stay if you want," said Dipti. "But I'm exhausted, and I have to be at Master Izdubar's chambers at sunup tomorrow."

"You," Zaidu replied, "are the enemy of fun."

"Come on," Dipti heaved himself up. "Let's go home."

Dipti pulled Zaidu up from the table and over to the bar where he dropped a few copper obols on the beer-stained wood of the countertop. Zaidu tried to catch Arwia's eye as they made their way to the door, but she was busy flirting with a table of tan men in clay-stained leather aprons—bricklayers, Zaidu guessed. One looked up and caught Zaidu's eye. His expression darkened and he started to get up from the table. Dipti pulled him out the door before anything dangerous could unfold.

"This whole city is full of madmen," Dipti said as they stumbled out into the moonlit street that was little more than an alley, a narrow dirt trail winding between mud-plastered shacks.

"There's an old joke, you know, that they tell about this city," Zaidu said, orienting himself in the direction of home.

"What joke is that?" Dipti asked, only half interested.

"It's not a very funny joke," Zaidu said. "But here it is."

"Well, if it's not funny," Dipti asked, "then why are you telling it?"

Zaidu waved his hand. "Just listen."

"You're drunk, Zaidu." Dipti turned away and started walking for home.

"Maybe so," Zaidu slurred. "But I want to tell this story. So we live in 'Godgate,' right?"

"'Gate of the Gods,' more properly," Dipti replied. "I mean, *Bab-ili* in the old Akkadu tongue—"

"I know more old Akkadu than you do, you ass." Zaidu waved a hand dismissively. "Do you want to hear this story or not?"

"I thought it was a joke," Dipti said.

"Story, joke, whatever," Zaidu answered. He began to trudge homeward, and Dipti followed. "Anyway, this was a few hundred years ago, back when Ashûru kings ruled Babili. One of those kings uprooted a lot of Yehudu people, brought them east from Yerushalem and made them live here."

"That would be Emperor Nabû-kudurri-ushûr." Dipti pronounced it carefully, imitating Master Izdubar's stodgy accent again.

"That's a mouthful," said Zaidu. "Gods, those Ashûru throne-names."

"I knew a priest once who took the name Adad-apla-iddîna," said Dipti.

"Wonder if he made the priestesses call him that in bed," Zaidu mused, running his hand along the wall. "Anyhow, the Yehudu people were force-marched here to Babili. And when they arrived, they were appalled to hear such a riot of foreign tongues in the streets. You know how it is in this city. You ask someone for directions, you never know if they'll speak proper Aramaya or one of those thick northern dialects, or Parsa, or Yehud, or—"

"Elline common-tongue." Dipti nodded. "Yes, it's a mess. We all know."

“Well, like I said,” Zaidu went on, “they heard this cacophony and couldn’t make any sense of it.” He paused and turned to Dipti, raising a finger, a wry grin crossing his lips. “So instead of Babili, they called this city *Babel*, which means ‘confused.’”

Dipti stood in silence for a moment, waiting expectantly. “That’s it?” he asked at last.

“I guess it’s not very funny.” Zaidu shrugged.

“Not even a joke, really,” Dipti said. “More of a pun, I suppose.”

“Well,” said Zaidu. “Here our city still stands, just as confused as it ever was.”

“You’re the one who’s confused,” Dipti replied. “Home is down this alley, not that one.”



Zaidu and Dipti stumbled homeward through the tightly winding alleys, between densely packed and stacked houses of mud-brick, all their wood shutters locked tight. They climbed over the bricks of crumbling ancient walls, amid cracked and defaced mosaics and reliefs: lions, bulls, dragons whose eyes had been gouged from the stone.

They crept past the smooth-plastered walls of new houses raised on the ruins of crumbling ones, some already bearing painted graffiti in the letters of Aramaya—“*Hanina, why won’t you love me?*”—or of the Elline alphabet—“*I’ll race my horse against any in Babili, and I’ll win*”—or of the ancient and universal signs of stars and faces. Still others bore drawings of sleek horses and broad-winged eagles; wide eyes and grotesque phalluses, and the more abstract swirls and zigzags that marked safe houses or generous bakeries in the cipher of some tribe or other.

In the shadowy alleys under wooden arches, beneath bridges of apartments and shops, Zaidu caught sight of thieves, dashing down side-streets so narrow they had to turn sideways to fit through them.

They saw a dim flicker of firelight around the next corner, and rounded it to come face to face with a pair of Elline soldiers in polished iron helmets, their red tunics trimmed in white, oil lamps upraised as they scanned the street with narrowed eyes. These pale-skinned foreigners clutched long iron-tipped spears, and swords hung at their sides. After a long moment of silent scrutiny by lamplight, Zaidu and Dipti nodded, and the Ellines nodded, and they moved on.

On the next street they passed a pack of furtive men standing in a huddle, tapping knives and wood cudgels against their palms. The men fell abruptly silent, waited for Zaidu and Dipti to pass, then began muttering again once they were out of range.

Zaidu glanced back at the huddle of men, and tripped in a pothole amid the weeds, barely managing to stay upright.

"This city used to be so beautiful," he murmured, regaining his balance.

Dipti raised an eyebrow. "Getting nostalgic now, are we? As far as I can remember, Babili's always been a reeking ruin."

"In our lifetimes, yes." Zaidu nodded, falling back into a wavering walk in the direction of home. "But before these Ellines came, it was the heart of the greatest empire on earth. Home of the Hanging Gardens. The glimmering blue gates."

Dipti snorted, matching his friend's pace. "You mean the gates where soldiers go to piss?"

Zaidu ignored him. "The observatories where brilliant priests studied the movements of the stars."

"We still have those," Dipti pointed out. "You work in one of them."

"Libraries," Zaidu went on, strolling and gesturing like a temple lecturer. "Theaters. Museums. Banquet halls. Markets filled with exotic spices and fabrics, and strange beasts from

faraway lands. Festivals where crowds of ten-thousands gathered to celebrate the glory of the Gods.”

“Yes, I suppose it must’ve been a lovely city before the Parsa came, and the Ellines after them.” Dipti sighed. “We were born too late to see it.”

“Not just lovely.” Zaidu shook his head. “Magnificent. A wonder of the world. An earthly paradise without equal.”

“I don’t know if I’d go *that* far—”

“And look at it now. Potholes in the streets. Trash piled in the doorways. Husks of dead trees in the gardens. Temples and palaces crumbling to rubble. Cattle grazing in the avenues. All because a pack of scheming, backstabbing, illiterate Ellines are squatting in the royal palace.”

“Shh!” Dipti hissed as they rounded another corner.

“Ellines ruling Babili,” Zaidu went on. “Ellines ruling Misr on the Nile. They even tried to conquer Hindush in the east, word has it, until some king drove them out. They *infest* this wide world of ours.”

Dipti winced. “One of these days you’re going to say that where the wrong person can hear you.”

“I honestly don’t care anymore.” Zaidu shrugged. “This has happened before, and it’ll happen again—if we manage to survive this age of savagery.” He shook his head. “Sometimes I feel like old king Gudea, fighting to preserve Shumér through the First Dark Age, when the Guti barbarians swept over the land two thousand years ago.”

“Here we go again.” Dipti sighed.

“Or the kings of Babili, fighting their way up out of the Second Dark Age a thousand years after that, amid the wars with Ash’shúr and the Khatti, and the Kalshu and Elamu, and only the Gods know how many other squabbling kingdoms. In every dark time, there’s always been a lamp in the night.”

Dipti grunted a laugh. “And you’re that lamp? That’s what you’re saying?”

Zaidu fell silent for a moment, plodding slowly around the potholes.

“Somebody’s got to be,” he muttered. He drew a deep breath, then sighed. “Sometimes I truly hate this city.”

“No,” Dipti said. “You adore it. That much is clear. You love it with your whole heart.”

“I love what it used to be,” Zaidu said. “What it once was.”

“How do you know what it used to be?” Dipti asked. “You weren’t there. Now look, here’s our door.”

Dipti knocked softly, and a sleepy-eyed scribe opened the worn wood door, then shuffled back to his mat, lay down, and promptly fell asleep. Zaidu and Dipti made their way across the dark apartment, past floormats where a few other scribes lay snoring. They found their own mats, unstrapped their sandals, lay down on the soft wool, and closed their eyes in the dark.

And Zaidu slipped into dreams of a Babili that was no more, and perhaps never would be again—a city of wondrous temples, grand palaces, and wide avenues where royal processions paraded solid-gold statues of the Gods amid the jubilation of tens of thousands. It was here, in *this* Babili, that he felt most truly at home.



HE WOKE TO dim predawn light, and the sound of arguing.

“I don’t know what happened to your stylus-box, Gibil,” Dipti was saying.

“I’m telling you, it isn’t here,” said Gibil, pulling off his wool headband and running his hands through his black hair. “I’ve looked everywhere.”

All the other scribes had already left, either because they'd had their own pre-dawn appointments, or because they'd gotten tired of listening to the bickering.

"How many places could it be, Gibil?" Zaidu said, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. "We all sleep in the same room. Did you look in the clothing chest?"

"Yes I looked in the Gods-damned clothing chest."

"All right, all right," said Zaidu, rubbing his aching head. "Calm down. It's too early for this."

"It's too late for this, is what it is," said Gibil. "I'm supposed to be at the courthouse by sunup, and now I'm going to be late. It takes half an hour to walk over there."

"That reminds me," said Dipti. "I've got to get to work, too."

"And what do I do?" cried Gibil. "Show up late, with no stylus?"

"Good Gods, just use one of mine, Gibil," said Zaidu, taking his own stylus-box from the small wood chest next to his bed. He lifted a thin reed stylus from the box and handed it to Gibil, who took it with a quiet "Thank you."

"If I find your box, I'll let you know," said Dipti. He glanced out the window. "Now look what time it is. Didn't even have time for breakfast." He clutched his stylus-box to his chest, running out the door, calling, "See you tonight" to Zaidu as he closed it behind him.

"I'd better go, too," said Gibil. "Really, thanks for the stylus. I mean it."

"Don't mention it," said Zaidu, as Gibil hurried out the door.

Zaidu rubbed his eyes and his head, but none of that made the ache go away. He shuffled through the back of the house into the complex's courtyard, pumped some water from the well, and drank it straight from the bucket in big draughts. His stomach protested, but it made him feel a little better. He muttered a quick prayer to Nabú, the God of scribes and writing, just for good measure. Then he hurried back inside, grabbed his stylus-box, strapped on his sandals, and hustled out the door.

Rushing through the narrow streets, Zaidu dodged around the early-morning crowds of cloth-sellers and trinket-hawkers, the wood poles over their shoulders dangling with carved amulets for warding off demons, or tiny votive statues for the temple. He ducked down a side street and took a shortcut he knew, passing into the cleaner brick walls and broader avenues of the temple district as he headed for the astrological observatory.

The mud-brick edifice would stand out in any city, but the planners of Babili had surrounded it with a flat open courtyard of flowerbeds and tree planters, just to make sure all passers-by gave proper attention to its magnificence—its tall columns painted blue and gold, capped by friezes carved with the symbols of the Gods: stars, the sun, the moon, and other heavenly bodies. On any other day, Zaidu might have paused to admire it in the golden morning light.

This morning, though, he tore across that courtyard at a speed just short of a dead run, drawing disapproving gazes from the priests and eunuchs who shuffled pensively in their colorful linen robes. He ran up the steps into the observatory's lower foyer, then up the winding brick staircase that led to Master Tattannu's private chambers. By the time he reached the chamber's door—fine dark wood, polished to a gleam, on which hung a wood plaque neatly painted with the the master's name in Aramaya letters—he was gasping and panting like a dog.

He took a moment to compose himself, then knocked.

"Come!" called a voice from inside.

Zaidu opened the door and stepped into the master's chamber. As he shut the door carefully behind him, he glanced at a table of work that'd evidently been piling up since last night, to judge by the burned-out oil lamps and candles. The table held tall piles of papyrus scrolls, and stacks of thick wax scratch-pads and clay tablets, many of them etched with dense patterns of tiny wedge-shaped symbols.

Master Tattannu hunched over the table, shuffling his notes, his long gray hair and beard hanging over his burgun-

dy linen robe. He glanced up as Zaidu entered, raising his thick eyebrows.

“You’re late,” the master said.

“You’re quite right, master,” said Zaidu. “I was, eh, unavoidably detained, preparing my materials.”

“You lost your stylus-box.”

“I had to calm another scribe who’d lost his, and lend him a stylus.”

The master shook his head. “It’s not proper for all you young scribes to live together. You should have your own house. A wife and children. That’s how we did things when I was young.”

“Quite right, master, as always. I’m sorry.”

The master waved a hand absentmindedly. “Never mind that now. I need you to transcribe my notes onto tablets, and have them baked.”

“Certainly. What exactly will I be transcribing, if I may ask?”

Master Tattannu looked up, and a smile crossed his wrinkled face. “Let me show you.”

The master laid out a series of tablets and scrolls across the table, along with an assortment of six-sided prisms of baked clay, their faces engraved with tables of cramped symbols so tiny they were scarcely legible, recording the positions of stars and planets on each day of the year. The sheer breadth of languages represented on this desk astonished even Zaidu, lettered as he was. Some older prisms were inscribed in classical Akkadu, while the parchments and papyri bore the squat rounded letters of modern Aramaya, or of Yehudu, which Zaidu hadn’t even known the master could read.

Other tablets were inscribed with the sharp triangular glyphs of Elamu, and—Zaidu could scarce believe his eyes—even pale, spiderweb-cracked lumps of clay, stamped with the crisscrossed needle-hashes and pictoglyphs of archaic Shuméru. *Those tablets must be two thousand years old, at the very least*, Zaidu thought. It took a master’s credentials to even be allowed to handle texts of that age, let alone remove them from the archive building.

Master Tattannu caught Zaidu's eye, smiled, and said, "Yes, those are tablets from old Shumér."

"I must admit, master," said Zaidu, "now you've sparked my curiosity."

"Then let us begin," said the master.



MASTER TATTANNU BEGAN by explaining that he'd perfected a method of pinpointing the position of Marutúk—the purple wandering star which bore the name of the father-God—in the night sky on any day of the year, without having to refer to the dense tables of recorded positions covering the clay prisms on his desk. The master was well aware that other astrologers had conceived of this approach before him. Its basic outlines, at least, had been known in Babili for nearly a hundred years. But over a few weeks of feverish work, Master Tattannu believed, he had carried the technique to a new height of simplicity and precision.

The method involved a long list of complicated fractions, and a trapezoid divided in half, and a lot of calculations about time and speed, most of which Zaidu didn't really understand. He'd never had much of a head for numbers, and last night's sweet-beer wasn't helping.

"So this shape represents Marutúk's speed as he traverses the heavens," Zaidu said, pointing at a trapezoid the master had drawn, wider at the top than at the bottom.

"No, not his speed," said Master Tattannu. "The *pace of change* in his speed."

Zaidu wrinkled his brow. "I'm sorry, master, but what's the difference?"

“As Marutúk moves across the heavens,” said Master Tattannu, tracing a line across the trapezoid with his finger. “His speed changes, yes—but so does the *rate* at which his speed changes over time.” He tapped the curved line with his finger to emphasize his point. “Ha! You see?”

“I’m afraid I don’t,” said Zaidu, his head feeling cloudy and sore. Why did the master have to choose this morning, of all mornings, for a lesson in advanced mathematics? “Please forgive my stupidity, master,” he said. “Perhaps it’s best if I simply copy it as you’ve drawn it—”

“No no! You must understand what you’re transcribing. This is very important.” He lifted out a soft clay tablet marked with a large circle. “Now, this shape, you see, represents the sky, the dome of the heavens. Yes?”

“I see, master.”

“Now, on the first night, Marutúk moves one-sixty-fourth part across this half of the heavens.” Master Tattannu took the reed stylus from Zaidu and made a mark in the clay, just slightly to the right of the circle’s left edge. “You see?”

“I think so, master.”

“Excellent. Now, on the second night, he moves one-sixty-sixth part.” The master made a second mark, a bit farther to the right of the first mark. “His speed is decreasing as he nears the center of the heavenly dome. Only the Gods, in their wisdom, know why.”

“Yes, master. He slows as he nears the center.”

“Precisely. Now on the third, fourth, and fifth nights, Marutúk travels one-seventieth part. Then one-eightieth part. Then ninety-sixth part.” The master made a series of marks at decreasing distances toward the center of the circle. “His speed is decreasing, yes. But here is the crucial insight: the *pace* at which he slows—is *increasing!*”

Zaidu nodded, still not quite sure this was making sense.

“By the time Marutúk reaches the center of the heavens,” Master Tattannu said, “He is moving at one-one-hundred-

twelfth part per night. So slow, he's barely moving at all. Were his speed to keep decreasing at this rate, he would almost cease to move altogether in another—"

"—ten days," whispered Zaidu, then said, "I'm sorry for interrupting, master."

Master Tattannu smiled. "Nine, in fact," he said. "You're a quick study, Zaidu."

"Thank you, master," said Zaidu. "But I'm afraid I fail to see why this is so important."

"Ah!" said Master Tattannu, and bent over the tablet again. "Well, you see, Marutúk, in his wisdom, does not stop. He pauses and rests when he reaches the center of the heavens. Then, after a few days tarrying there, he reverses course. As he descends the dome of the sky—" the master tapped the marks he'd made, from the center outward, farther and farther apart, "his speed begins to quicken, at *precisely the same pace* as it slowed."

Zaidu stared at the diagram for a few moments, repeating the master's words under his breath: *pace of quickening. Pace of slowing. Both paces are the same.*

"Is this really true?" he asked at last.

"So I have calculated," said the master. "Until at last Marutúk reaches the far edge of the heavens, and immediately begins to climb back toward the center, along the very same path as before, at exactly the same rate of quickening. Gods be praised for creating such an ordered universe."

"Gods be praised," echoed Zaidu out of habit, concentrating on the marks in the clay.

"And when we weave together the threads of the pace—you see, the *pace*—at which Marutúk's speed changes each night," said the master, "We assemble a figure: this trapezoid." He tapped the asymmetrical shape again.

Zaidu was nodding slowly. "Which means if you know how much Marutúk moves on any given night..."

"Yes, go on," said the master, smiling gently.

“Immortal Gods! If you knew the pace of change for every star, you wouldn’t need the check the tables on those clay prisms, or anything—”

“Precisely,” said Master Tattannu.

“To calculate where a star would be on any night, all you’d need to know is its position one night and the night after.” Zaidu clapped his hand to his forehead. “By Énli’s breath!” He winced. “Sorry, master.”

Tattannu smiled gently. “Quite a gift from Énki, the Father of Cleverness, don’t you think?”

Zaidu shook his head. “The other astrologers will lavish you with prizes—”

“—or they might drag me outside the walls and stone me. The minds of priests are known to have a... rather slow pace of change.” Master Tattannu laughed softly at his little joke. “In any case, I think it’s important to make a record of this method. Someone might find it useful.”

Zaidu rubbed his chin. “What about other objects, master?”

“Other—objects?” Tattannu raised a bushy eyebrow.

“What if—” Zaidu struggled to fit his thought into words. “Well, you say the speeds of all stars in the heavens have their ordained rates of change.”

The master nodded. “I believe it is so.”

“Well, what about objects here on Earth?” Zaidu asked. “What if you could, you know, throw a stone, or launch an arrow, and calculate exactly where it would be—”

The old master laughed softly. “It would be nice, wouldn’t it, if our earthly world were as predictable and orderly as the stars?”

“Yes,” said Zaidu. “I suppose it would be.”

“I think we’d best stick to the heavens,” said the master, handing the stylus back to Zaidu.

“Of course, master,” said Zaidu. “I’ll get started on the tablets now. And—thank you. Thank you very much for the lesson.”

Master Tattannu smiled. “I’m glad you enjoyed it. And now, I believe it’s time for this old man to take a nap.”

Zaidu worked on the transcription for the next few hours, carefully copying diagrams and fractions and tiny clusters of triangle-shaped symbols from wax pads and papyrus scrolls to clay tablets, which—since the master was paying extra—would be baked to rock-hardness, so they'd last for centuries. Zaidu tried to focus on the formulas and their meanings, but after a while he got lost in the copying, as he always did, seeing nothing but lines of symbols, knowing nothing but the flow of the work, like water along a riverbank.

When he looked up at the window it was nearly sunset, and Master Tattannu was still sleeping. Zaidu decided to let him sleep. In the last of the sunlight he finished copying a few pages of notes, then arranged everything neatly on the table, packed up his stylus-box, and headed downstairs into the courtyard. Most of the priests and eunuchs were gone by this time of the evening, which was a relief.



ZAIDU WALKED HOME, thinking of stars and Gods and the heavens, and nearly bumped into a trinket-seller returning from the market, who cursed him loudly in some crass southern dialect.

Once he'd deposited his stylus-box in the chest next to his sleeping-mat, he walked the few blocks to the tavern, where he found Dipti already a few beers deep.

"That kind of day, was it?" Zaidu asked as he waved down Arwia to bring him a mug.

"You wouldn't believe it," said Dipti.

"Try me." Zaidu settled in at the table.

"The Gods-damned scribal school double-booked me!" Dipti cried. "Can you believe that? I had Master Izdubar and

Master Shamas yelling at me at the same time—both their transcriptions were absolute top priority, of course—and I worked all day and still didn't finish either of them. Both of those bastards are too cheap to give me a candle or—Gods forbid—light a damned lamp, so when the sun went down they finally let me go home.”

Zaidu groaned. “And you're going back there tomorrow?”

“Do I have a choice?” Dipti sighed, long and tired.

“Maybe you should talk to the scribal school,” Zaidu offered.

“And say what?” Dipti threw up his hands. “I'm lucky to have the work, in this economy.”

Zaidu nodded and sipped his beer. “Well,” he said, after a moment, “you won't believe what happened to me today.”

Dipti groaned. “Don't tell me they double-booked you, too.”

“No, thank the Gods.” Zaidu said. “But Master Tattannu told me something very interesting.”

“Oh, well, I'm glad one of us learned something interesting today.” Dipti rubbed his brow.

Arwia arrived at the table with Zaidu's mug of beer, which she set on the stained wood with a smile. “Got any Shumeru for me today, scribe?” she asked, smiling.

“Maybe later,” said Zaidu. “Come back and we'll see.”

She bit her lip and winked, and he smiled back. She hurried off to other tables before her father could shout at her.

“Master Tattannu told me,” Zaidu began. “Well, I don't know how much I should reveal, but he explained there's a way to calculate the position of any star in the heavens, without using the tables.”

“Fascinating,” said Dipti dryly.

“And it got me thinking—”

“You think there's any money in that?” asked Dipti.

“In what? In these calculations?” Zaidu shook his head. “I don't know. I hadn't really thought about it. There could be.”

“Maybe you could, you know, sneak some of them out with you.”

Zaidu slapped the table, splashing beer foam. “Come on, man! I’m trying to explain something important here, and you’re talking about stealing from clients. What’s wrong with you?”

“Oh, sorry,” said Dipti, taking a slow sip of his beer. “I didn’t have as *interesting* a day as you. Please, by all means, continue.”

“Well,” said Zaidu, “I was just thinking—I mean, Master Tattannu said this probably wouldn’t work, but I was thinking, what if everything that moves in both the heavens and the earth really does follow the same laws?”

Dipti rubbed at his temples. “What laws? What are you talking about, Zaidu? Gods help me, this is worse than your Shuméru rant last night.”

Zaidu waved a hand dismissively. “Fine. You know what? Forget it. It’s probably not important anyway.” He raised his clay mug and took a long series of swallows.

“I’ll tell you what’s important,” said Dipti. “The way Arwia looked at you a minute ago. Did you see that? She winked at you. Actually winked at you.”

“Yeah, I guess I did see that.” Zaidu grinned.

Dipti spread his hands. “You’re not going to get more of an invitation than that. You need to give her the answer she’s hoping for.”

Zaidu glanced over at the counter. “Her father’s standing right there, Dipti.”

“After closing time, then.” Dipti flicked his eyes toward the door. “Meet her outside.”

Zaidu sighed. “I’ll think about it.”

“You’ll do it,” said Dipti. “I swear by all the Gods, if I catch you coming home alone tonight, I’ll beat you worse than Master Shamas ever did.”

Zaidu laughed. A long, tired, shaking laugh.

“If not for you, do it for me,” said Dipti. He downed the rest of his beer, and waved down Arwia for another.

They sat and drank and cracked jokes and traded complaints for a while, waiting for Arwia to finish her work for the

night. Dipti got very drunk and tried to pick a fight with a chariot-builder. Zaidu stopped him before anything could happen.

And when the night was over they stumbled out into the street, and Arwia was there waiting for them. Zaidu talked to her and made her laugh while Dipti slipped away, and Zaidu told Arwia some more poetry in Shuméru, and she loved every line of it.

She wrapped her arms gently around his neck and kissed him slow and lazily, and he kissed her back, long and soft, then harder, and he thought about the big house they'd move into in a nicer part of town, and the home they'd make together there. Gods and mathematics were the very furthest things from his mind.



“HEY! BOY. YES, you.” The voice echoed from a nearby alley.

Zaidu turned, his mind still swirling with the smell of Arwia's breath. The taste of her tongue.

A bearded man in a tattered tunic emerged from the shadows, his face lit by the flickering flame of the small torch in his hand.

Zaidu raised his hands. “I haven't got any coin!” he gasped. “I swear. Spent the last of it at the tavern.”

“I'm not here to rob you, boy,” the man snarled, twisting the scar that ran along his upper lip. “Those swine in the palace do enough of that already.”

“I'm sorry?” Zaidu's brow furrowed.

“We're not deaf,” the man replied. “We've heard you, every night outside the tavern. And you're right. Those Elline sons-of-whores are raping this city. You're not the only one who thinks so.”

"I'm, eh, glad to hear it," Zaidu stammered. "But I've really got to be going now."

"Oh, that's right," the man sneered. "Hurry home to your soft bed, while savages sleep in the palace, lining their pockets with stolen gold. Keep spilling words and cowering from action. 'The wolf circles around it and the lion picks it up.' Are you a wolf or a lion?"

Zaidu whirled on him. "What do you expect me to do? There's no room for lions anymore."

The man smiled crookedly. "Ah, now that's where we disagree, son."

"What are you talking about?" Zaidu shook his head.

"Follow me," said the man, and turned away down the alley.

Zaidu followed the torchlight through the narrow gaps between buildings, around tight corners and switchbacks, deeper into the entrails of this tumbledown neighborhood. He caught torch-lit glimpses of rats swarming around trash-piles; rag-clad men sleeping in doorways; wild dogs looking up from their sleep, growling softly, eyes shining in the blackness.

The man knocked at a door, which swung aside to reveal a suspicious-looking woman, her head wrapped in rags.

"It's me," the man whispered. "And I've brought a guest."

The woman looked Zaidu up and down in a glance, then nodded curtly and stepped aside to let them in.

Two more men and a younger woman sat on battered cushions in the cramped interior, amid the guttering flame of a cheap fat-burning lamp.

"This is Zaidu," said the man who'd brought him here.

The others nodded in greeting, announcing their names: Mushezibti, Palusum, Sheshkala, Tilhar; though he immediately forgot whose name was whose. He was still a bit wobbly from the beer, though he felt he was concealing it well. He lowered himself onto a cushion, feeling slightly claustrophobic—though perhaps that was because they were all eyeing him with open suspicion.

"I'm Kutik," said the man who'd brought him here, extinguishing his torch. "Welcome to the family."

"Family?" Zaidu asked. "I'm still not sure I understand." He was fairly sure, though, that he did.

"When liars enter by the city gate," Kutik said, "fingers point at them from the front, and from behind. We all know who the liars in our city are."

"And a fettered dog stands ready to bite," Zaidu quoted in response. "Are you a scribe?"

Kutik shook his head. "Never learned the trick of it. But I listen. I listen to everything and everyone. That's how I heard your complaints. And you're right—we're all fettered dogs these days. All except those filthy Ellines, and the nobles who dance at the ends of their puppet-strings."

"We'll have them dancing at the ends of ropes soon enough," muttered a potbellied man in a long, loose toga, who Zaidu thought was probably the one called Palusum.

The woman who'd answered the door—Sheshkala, was it?—set a small tray of barley-cakes near the fire and offered one to Zaidu. He accepted it, though he had no appetite.

"Listen, I—" Zaidu raised his hands. "I'm just a scribe. I transcribe documents. I hate these Elline savages as much as you do, and I wish they were gone. I support your cause. Truly, I do. But I'm not your man."

They all watched him for a long, acutely uncomfortable moment.

"We haven't even told you what we're planning yet," Kutik said at last.

Zaidu looked around, meeting each man's eyes in turn. They looked disappointed with him, which somehow felt much worse than if they'd been angry.

"Oh, all right," he said at last. "Tell me what you plan to do."

Kutik smiled tightly. "Show him, Tilhar."

The gaunt, sour-faced man rose from his cushion and ducked behind the cloth curtain in the back doorway. He emerged cra-

dling a clay barrel, stoppered tightly and bound with leather straps and set it with utmost delicacy on the cushion he'd just vacated. The woman Sheshkala reached out and lifted the lamp away, setting it as far away from the barrel as possible.

"War-fire," Tilhar said, his voice like wind through a reed.

Zaidu's eyes widened. "The liquid flame?" he whispered.

"The same." Kutik smiled, nodding.

"How did you acquire it?" Zaidu asked.

Kutik snorted. "Does it matter? All that matters now is how we use it."

Zaidu stared at the small clay vessel, half-expecting it to explode in flame any moment, consuming them all. "How do you plan to use it?"

"We have word," Kutik said, "that the despot Seleukos plans to celebrate his birthday on the seventh day of the month of Simanu."

"That's five days from now," Zaidu murmured.

"Word is," Kutik continued, "the Elline tyrant will celebrate by sailing his royal barque down the Slow River, packed with his barbaric family, concubines, musicians—even a few traitorous nobles, if we're lucky."

Zaidu's breath caught in his throat. "And with one spark—" Tilhar grinned. "The whole boat goes up in flame."

"Liquid, resinous, inextinguishable flame," Kutik added approvingly.

"But how will you hurl the vessel?" Zaidu asked. "You have a catapult hidden away in that back room, too?"

Kutik laughed softly. "If only." He sighed. "No, I'm afraid one of us will have to board the boat, light the fuse, and smash the clay at the opportune moment."

"Someone who loves Babili more than his own life," Palusum huffed from his cushion in the corner.

Zaidu met the pudgy man's eyes. No mistaking the meaning in that look—the look that all the others were now giving him, too.

“Surely you can’t mean me,” he said softly.

“Look at us.” Kutik gestured around at the others. “Peasants. Wool-spinners. Butchers. None of us would get within a league of the royal barque. Now a well-respected scribe, on the other hand—one with connections at the temple...”

“I’m a transcriber!” Zaidu burst out. “I just copy texts! I’ve never even been to the palace. And no one at the temple gives a damn what I think.”

But Kutik was shaking his head. “That’s not what I hear.”

Zaidu’s brow furrowed. “What do you hear?”

“That a young scribe named Zaidu dreams of applying the mathematics of Heaven to the movement of objects on Earth.” Kutik grinned. “Just the sort of topic to intrigue and entertain an upstart Elline tyrant—even one as illiterate and barbaric as ours.”

“How did—” Zaidu stammered. “How can you possibly know about that? I only told—”

“—a certain master of astronomy,” Kutik finished, “who is most sympathetic to our cause, and has already been invited to join the tyrant on his little river outing.”

Zaidu’s eyes widened. He shook his head, as if that might cause these new facts to fall into some sort of rational array. This was too much to process all at once. “All the same,” he said, barely hearing his own words, “I’m not your man. I love Babili. Love it with my whole heart. But—”

“Think about it.” Kutik raised a hand, smiling gently. “That’s all I ask. Take the next two days and think it over. Search your heart. Find clarity.”

None of this seemed clear at all. The mathematics, the tavern, Arwia, the vessel of war-fire—it all whirled madly in his mind, like a dream. He barely remembered how he bid the plotters goodnight, or how he found his way home.



Zaidu was dreaming. He knew he must be dreaming because he walked not in Babili, but in an older city: a place of columns tiled in mosaics of red, black and white; of temples and stepped pyramids of mud-brick, where men and women in shaggy fleece garments carried reed baskets along dirt paths beneath the palms, and—so it was said—fish-scaled sages had come forth from the depths of the Two Rivers, to teach the crafts and sciences of civilization to the first men and women.

He could use some of that wisdom now, he thought. But everyone knew that after the great Flood, the sages had stopped coming forth from the Rivers, and the Gods had stopped speaking freely with mankind, as they had before. Zaidu wasn't sure how much of the old stories he believed. But judging by the state of Babili today, it seemed abundantly clear that the people of the Land Between the Rivers had been abandoned to fend for themselves.

Even as he thought this, Zaidu suddenly found that another man had appeared at his side. The man had long, shaggy black hair, and thick eyebrows that joined in the middle. Zaidu would've recognized his garb anywhere: the high-waisted kilt of thick-curved fleece worn by Shuméru men in the most ancient mosaics, and a bare chest tattooed with zigzagged patterns of red and black. Perhaps, Zaidu thought, his wish for heavenly wisdom from before the Flood had summoned this man—whoever he was—from the Sea of Dreams.

"That's quite a costume," Zaidu commented, by way of introduction.

“Costume?” The Shuméru man glanced down at himself and shrugged. “I could say the same of you,” he replied. “What land do you come from?”

Zaidu was really beginning to enjoy this. “From Babili,” he said. “And you—I can see you’ve come all the way from ancient Shumér, before the Flood.”

“The Flood—?” The kilted man looked astonished. He raised a hand to stop Zaidu, gazing into his eyes with fear. “Are you saying this flood really happens?” he demanded.

Sadness filled Zaidu. *I am warning this man of his own doom, he thought. A doom he cannot escape.* “Yes,” he said at last. “The Flood washed away all the cities of Shumér. Only a few people survived. They became the founders of the new dynasties.”

The man’s eyes widened. “What can we do?” he asked.

“Is this some kind of a test?” Zaidu’s raised an eyebrow, suspicious.

“Yes,” said the kilted man, nodding eagerly. “A test. How did people survive the Flood?”

Zaidu knew the tale by heart, as did all children of Babili. “I only know the story of one survivor,” he told the Shuméru man. “The stories say he built some kind of strange vessel that carried him over the waves.”

“A strange vessel,” the man muttered. After a moment, he shook his head. “Perhaps that will prove to be the answer,” he said.

Zaidu hadn’t the slightest idea what that meant. A new question rose to his lips, unbidden. “What about my questions?” he asked. “The wisdom I asked for?”

The shaggy-kilted man only shook his head. “What wisdom? What are you talking about?”

With the strange logic of dreams, Zaidu chose to ask about a problem that had scarcely crossed his thoughts lately: “What of the movement of objects on earth? Do they obey the same laws as bodies in the heavens?” Surely, he thought, men from

before the Flood must have understood such matters perfectly, guided as they were by the Gods themselves.

But the Shuméru man only gazed back at him, his face a mask of confusion. "I know nothing of the heavens," he said at last. "But so far as I have seen, all things obey the same law: the faster one rises, the faster one falls."

And in this dream, that answer somehow made perfect sense. Zaidu's heart swelled with joy. "Thank you," he told the man.

Then the mud-brick city was fading, and Zaidu was plummeting up from the Sea of Dreams into blinding daylight. Someone was calling his name.

"Hey, stop napping!" It was Arwia's voice.

The waking world flooded back. He was lying on the grass, and the sun was in his eyes. Arwia sat next to him, a baked clay tablet in her hands. They lay beneath the shade of a great juniper tree, in the last surviving garden of the royal park of Babili.

"Isn't it the student who's supposed to fall asleep?" Arwia teased. "Not the teacher?"

"Right." Zaidu blinked, raising himself upright. "Where were we?" he asked her, the dream already fading from memory.

"I was showing you the signs I remember from last time," she said. "Ah! I recognize this one!" She pointed to an intricate Shuméru glyph among the hundreds stamped into the clay. "It means 'man.'"

"You're close." Zaidu smiled. "But it's also got the sign for *gál*, 'big,' there on the left side. See? So it means *lugál*, 'big man' or 'king.'"

She wrinkled her nose, sighing in exasperation as she looked up from the clay tablet they held. "How do you keep all this straight?"

He snorted a laugh. "Don't forget, I had to beg Master Tattannu for permission to take this tablet out of the archives. It's not everyone who gets to read writing this ancient."

She fell back on the grass theatrically, throwing a hand over her eyes, as he carefully tucked the tablet back into his shoulder-bag. "I can see why it's not a popular pastime. One tiny mistake reading one little character," she said, "and the message changes from 'Please send barley' to 'Let's make war on Misr.' It's amazing this hasn't thrown the world into chaos by now."

He lay down beside her, wrapping his arm around her waist to pull her close. "Well, modern Aramaya is much simpler. We write it on parchment with an *aleph-bet* script. Just forty-four letters. Much less chance of confusion. But it'll never be as beautiful as Shuméru."

"It's beautiful when you speak it," she said, planting kisses against his cheek. "Tell me some more."

"*Something which has never occurred since time immemorial,*" he recited solemnly. "A young woman did not fart in her husband's embrace."

She rolled away from him, making an annoyed sound. He climbed on top of her, straddling her, pulling her hands away from her face as she struggled and squealed with laughter.

"I didn't like that one." She pouted.

He kissed her. "I'm sorry." And again. "I promise I'll tell you more." And again. "Soon."

She made a happy, humming sound, and they rolled on the grass together. Even now, pressed tightly against her, smelling her breath and tasting her skin, the city's melancholy pulled at him, like a thread of a garment slowly coming unwoven.

"What's in your mind, Zaidu?" she asked after a while. "You're not all here."

He drew a deep breath and sighed slowly, searching for some way to translate the feeling into words.

"Do you ever think about what this city used to be like?" he asked her at last. "I mean, before the Ellines came, or the Parsa kings before them. Back when Babili ruled herself."

She stroked his cheek. "My mother used to sing me tales of the old Empire, when I was a little girl. The gardens of a

thousand flowers. The shining golden gates. I saw them in my dreams, sometimes.”

“What about now?” he asked.

“What about what, now?” she replied, kissing his cheek.

“Do you ever see those places in your dreams anymore?”

She laughed softly. “Not for a long time. I can’t even remember the last dream I had. After a long night at the tavern, I’m just glad to be in my own bed.”

“The other night,” he said, “I dreamed of walking down the Processional Way in the new year’s festival. The king and nobles in jewels and furs. The solid-gold statues of the Gods. The crowds of dancers and musicians from all across the Empire. When I woke up, I felt cheated.”

“Was I there, in your dream?” She nuzzled against his neck.

“No,” he said. “I don’t think so.”

“Well then,” she slipped on top of him. “You should be glad you woke up.”

“Sometimes I think I’d trade my life,” he said, “just to resurrect this city.”

“Except it doesn’t work that way,” she murmured in his ear. “This city is what it is, and we’ve all got to live in it. But if you want to give your life away, I’ll be glad to accept it.”

He met her gaze, unsure if she meant what she seemed to be saying. She bit her lip, smiling shyly.

“Arwia, I—”

“Arwia, what?” she mocked.

“Yes,” he answered. “I—I think I’m supposed to ask that question, but yes. I’m yours.”

She kissed him again, harder than before.

“Then it’s settled,” she said. “I’ll take care of you, you’ll take care of me, and everyone else can take care of themselves.”

“And the city—”

“Not another word about the city,” she said, placing a finger on his lips. “I’m here. Now. What are you going to do with me?”

He rolled over on top of her, and gave her an answer.



HE WAS STROLLING back to the archives to return the clay tablet he'd shared with Arwia when he felt a presence behind him.

Trying not to appear too obvious, he turned and glanced back. Three Elline soldiers, armored and crimson-cloaked, unshaven and leering, about half a block behind him. He could almost smell them from where he was.

He turned a tight corner next to a bakery, hurrying down the narrow alley between two apartment blocks, as cats hissed and leaped out of his way. But somehow the soldiers were there at the end of the alley, waiting for him—how had they gotten there so quickly?—blocking his way, hairy hands resting casually on the worn pommels of their swords.

“*Poú pas se mia tétoia viasýni?*” one of them sneered. Zaidu's command of common-tongue Elline was nowhere near as practiced as Dipti's, but he still caught the meaning: “Where are you off to in such a hurry?”

“Sorry!” He raised his hands defensively, frantically trying to remember the rudiments of common-tongue grammar. “My Elline, not so good.”

The three soldiers exchanged glances, sharing a laugh. “Oh no! My Elline, not so good!” one of them mocked him in a high-pitched voice.

“Now isn't that strange?” the leader remarked. “A scribe who can't be bothered to learn the common language of his empire. Why, it's almost as if he doesn't recognize what a blessing it is to live under our benevolence.”

One word leaped out at Zaidu amid all the others.

“How—how you know I am a scribe?” he asked.

The leader grinned. "Oh, we've been watching you, we have. Isn't that right, boys?" The others grunted in agreement.

Zaidu's stomach plummeted, leaving a cold emptiness in its place.

"You lead quite the interesting life," the leader continued, picking his teeth with a splinter of wood. "Temple scribe by day, lover in the afternoon—and plotter against the throne by night."

Zaidu backed away. "Please, I don't know—I don't understand."

"Oh, I think you understand just fine," said the soldier, his grin widening. Zaidu smelled stale beer on the man's breath. "That sweet little thing of yours, though—she may not understand why you've up and disappeared. Perhaps I'll have to give her a bit of comfort myself—"

"Don't you touch her!" Zaidu howled in Aramaya, provoking laughs and gibberish from the soldiers.

Then everything seemed to happen at once. Zaidu swung his shoulder-bag like a sling, connecting hard with the side of the leader's head, cracking the tablet inside with a crunch like old bone. He winced, imagining the scolding he'd get from Master Tattannu.

Meanwhile the other two soldiers stepped out around the leader, grabbing the strap of the bag, tugging Zaidu away, tripping him so he stumbled backward and landed hard on the stones—

And suddenly the alley was full of fighters: Kutik and the others from the night-meeting; even fat Palusum, cracking a walking-stick over a soldier's head. The scarfed woman lashed out with a dagger, spilling the third soldier's blood as he fell screaming.

Kutik grabbed Zaidu by the collar and pulled him up. Then they were all running, rounding angled corners between tight-pressed buildings, leaping over trash-heaps, climbing fences and dashing through courtyards as old women leaped away in surprise, spilling laundry and buckets of water.

They reached a small low-set door. Kutik yanked it open and they piled inside and down the stairs, into a shadowy room that turned pitch-black when someone slammed the door behind them.

Kutik lit a lamp, filling the room with a dim orange glow. It was another cramped chamber: bare walls, a low table, a few cushions.

Zaidu took it all in, panting, trying to slow his breath. Suddenly he remembered his shoulder-bag, and the tablet he'd sneaked away from the archives after his morning session with Master Tattannu. He opened the bag, wincing: the tablet lay in dozens of pieces, shattered beyond repair.

"I'm sorry," Kutik said.

Zaidu shook his head. "It's not just the punishment I face," he said softly. "This tablet was centuries old. Now it's just another piece of old Babili that's been smashed to rubble."

He sank onto a cushion, letting out a long, slow breath.

"There's no going back now," Kutik said, sinking onto the cushion next to Zaidu as the others busied themselves double-checking the room's supplies. "You realize that, don't you?"

Zaidu looked up sharply and met the man's eyes. "Did you set this up? Tell me the truth, Kutik."

The silence between them stretched tightly, until at last Kutik broke it.

"Those men had been following you for days," he said.

"That's not what I asked."

Kutik nodded. "Our man told them where you'd be this afternoon. That's all—"

"I knew it!" Zaidu leaped up, his face contorted with rage. "All you care about is your stupid plot! I'm not your puppet—I'm a human being! I have—" He trailed off.

"What do you have?" Kutik asked.

"I have my own life," Zaidu finished weakly.

Kutik watched him for a long moment.

"Is that truly what you want?" the other man asked at last. "To marry that girl, settle down, raise your children in a Babili ruled by Ellines? Live out your days as a scribe, all the while

forced to learn more common-tongue and forget Shuméru? To watch this city crumble slowly to dust before your eyes?"

Zaidu sank back down to the cushion. "What's the alternative?" he asked quietly. "Cast myself into the Underworld? Leave behind everything I love?"

Kutik leaned in close. "If you do this for Babili," he said, his voice almost a whisper, "whether you succeed or fail, we will make sure she is provided for. A high position at a faraway temple. A quiet farm in the countryside. Anything she desires, as long as it's within our reach. I promise this."

Zaidu looked into Kutik's eyes, then down at his hands.

"But that's not why you'll do this," Kutik said. "You'll do it because you know, in your heart, that it is the only path. I see it in your eyes, clear as a morning sky."

Hot tears welled up in Zaidu's eyes. He fought them back down. "I can't leave her," he said. "I can't."

"Zaidu," Kutik said. "After what you've done today, she will never be safe. You must know this."

"After what *you've* done!" Zaidu cried. "You did this to me!"

"No." Kutik shook his head calmly. "The enemy did it to all of us."

Zaidu stared at him, his face a mask of incredulity.

"I had a wife," Kutik said. "And I once thought like you. Thought that as long as I kept my head down, everything would be all right. But one day, some bastard of an Elline general took a liking to my beautiful Inu. We fought back, of course. I and every man and woman on my block. But of course, the soldiers won in the end." He tapped the scar on his upper lip. "They took her away, and I've been in hiding ever since. Don't even know if she's alive or dead."

A long silence hung in the air. Zaidu had no words to offer.

"And as long as an outsider sits on our throne," Kutik said. "This will never stop. Do you see that? They have stolen all choices from us—all but one: the choice of what to do now. Here. In this moment."

Zaidu shook his head. "There's always another choice."

"Then name it," Kutik said. "Zaidu, if there is any other path from here, then show it to me. I beg you."

Zaidu sat for what seemed hours, searching for any crack in the wall; any glimmer of hope that might light the way to a life with Arwia—a long, peaceful life in some corner of the earth where empires and kings would simply leave them alone. But there was no such corner. The earth was ruled by Ellines now; and if their empire fell, then after them would come others still more barbaric. This was it. This was the end of history. But if Babili was to burn, then her conquerors must burn, too.

"I want her taken care of," Zaidu said at last, letting the tears come. It was a relief to let them rise in his eyes, softening the world with their warmth, running down his cheeks. "Whatever she wants, I want her to have."

"Of course." Kutik smiled softly. "I have already promised this."

"Tomorrow, then," Zaidu said. "The king's birthday."

"Tomorrow," Kutik agreed.



"I KNOW THIS can't be easy for you," Seleukos Nikator—"the Victor," white-haired Elline king of Babili and the Eastern Provinces—was saying.

Zaidu could barely concentrate. His mind was on the sealed clay vessel of war-fire that was concealed belowdecks, waiting for the right moment.

"The way my soldiers behaved toward you was atrocious," Seleukos was saying in fluent, Elline-accented Aramaya. "Simply barbaric. Inexcusable. I've already had them flogged."

The king reclined in a solid-gold throne near the stern of the royal barque, which rocked gently as it sailed down the Slow River. Jewelled dragons crawled about the throne's legs, extending their claws to form the chair's feet. The aged king sat draped in purple Parsa silk embroidered with circular golden flowers, in classic Babili style. Atop his blocky, wispy-haired head sat a gold laurel wreath: a typical fashion for Elline conquerors.

"That wasn't necessary, Your Majesty," Zaidu replied, without really hearing the words.

"Oh, but it was!" exclaimed the king. "It most certainly was. I hear a tablet was damaged in the brawl. An irreplaceable relic of ancient Shumér."

"That was my fault, Majesty," Zaidu said drily. "In the heat of battle, I defended myself by cracking the tablet against your soldier's head."

"Ha!" The king threw back his head and barked a laugh. "If only it were as easy to transmit culture as to transmit force of motion. Am I right?"

"A most erudite observation, sire," commented Master Tattannu, who stood at Zaidu's right. He shot Zaidu a sharply disappointed glance that somehow stung worse than any whipping.

"I must be honest, gentlemen," the old king mused, looking out over the calm water. "This is not the Babili I dreamed of. The city was already half in ruins when General Alexandros liberated it from the Parsa kings, nearly fifty years ago. And I fear we've only made things worse since then."

"Liberated," Zaidu muttered.

The king cocked his head. "What's that you say?"

"Eh—he means to say, Majesty," Master Tattannu put in, "that perhaps it is liberation itself that creates many of our problems. Our people have been ruled by great kings since time immemorial. We require a strong, firm hand to guide us."

"Perhaps it is as you say." The king nodded thoughtfully, stroking his bare chin. "And in that case, I owe you all the more apology for my poor control of my own soldiers."

“Seleukos Nikator owes me nothing,” Zaidu said, careful to cloak his bitterness with a humble tone.

“And I am honored,” the king concluded, “that you have elected to join me here today, in celebration of my seventy-first birthday.” He shook his head. “Seventy-one years. To think that an old war-horse should live so long.”

The king stared off over the water for a few uncomfortable moments, while a band of musicians played a hymn to the Goddess Ishtar. Nobles and royals in long silken robes mingled around a long golden table laid with gem-encrusted plates of fruits and candied nuts.

A pair of gray-haired Ellines—probably generals-turned-statesmen, judging by the scars on their arms—flirted with a gaggle of young Babili heiresses by the wine-pitchers. A bald bureaucrat from Misr—an ambassador of the Nile kingdom’s latest Elline overlord—stood draped in white linen, his kohl-shadowed eyes narrowing with concentration as he chatted with three chestnut-skinned gentleman in bejewelled vests and red silk trousers: diplomats from the jungle-lords of Hindush, far to the east, unless Zaidu missed his guess. *Not that these nobles’ origins and names will count for anything*, he thought, *once they’ve joined the king at the bottom of this river.*

“So tell me, young scribe,” Seleukos said, “of your plan to apply the mathematics of Heaven to the movement of objects here on Earth.”

At that moment, Zaidu felt like a ship abandoned by the wind. He felt no great love for this king, or any softening toward the Elline conquerors. But he realized—“clear as a morning sky,” as Kutik would say—that killing this old man and his family would accomplish nothing. Elline soldiers would swarm through the city in vengeance, slaughtering plotters and innocents alike. Arwia and Dipti and everyone who’d known him would die by the sword, or worse. And in this king’s place would rise some new usurper, even more illiterate and uncultured. The king would suffer only for a few moments, and Babili would suffer for centuries to come.

The king's gaze—sharp as a blade, despite the old man's years—pulled Zaidu back to the moment.

"I have no great plan, Majesty," he said. "Only an idea."

A smile crossed the king's wrinkled face. "Then I would hear this idea of yours, young Zaidu."

"It's quite simple, really," he said. "Master Tattannu has amply demonstrated that the speeds of the Gods change at consistent rates as they traverse the heavens. I proposed that the same might be true of objects here on Earth."

"Perhaps you might—" Master Tattannu met Zaidu's eyes. He nodded toward the boat's hold, where the clay vessel was hidden. "—retrieve that bit of parchment with my calculations, to better demonstrate the principle."

The king waved a hand dismissively. "You know, I never learned to read. Never seemed to find the time. I have the greatest respect for anyone who masters that art."

"All the same, Majesty," said Master Tattannu, "my illustrations might prove helpful."

"Ah yes. Illustrations." The king nodded. "Yes, why not? Anything to liven up this dreary party."

Zaidu's walk to the door of the hold seemed to last for ages. With every step, possible plans multiplied in his mind: hurl the vessel overboard. Bring it before the king and report the plot. Pretend to drop it, then flee in the ensuing panic. Every one of the schemes seemed fraught with danger, filled with holes. Zaidu wished he could undo all this: step back to the night when he'd kissed Arwia, and take a different turn on the walk home—one that steered a wide berth around Kutik's alley.

Somehow, he kept moving—opened the door to the hold, ducked down into the darkness, and retrieved the vessel. It felt heavy in his hands, its surface cool to the touch.

As he lifted it out into daylight, he bumped into someone tall and perfumed.

"I say! What's that you've got there?" a voice cried in Elline.

"Gods save us!" a general howled. "He's got a fire-vessel!"

Suddenly all was panic. Shrieking men and women pushed for the sideboards, leaped overboard into the river, or clambered away from him.

Down near the stern, the king was pushing himself up from his golden throne, crying, "What is this madness?" as Master Tattannu gestured desperately, trying to get him to return to his seat.

Without really knowing why, Zaidu did the least dangerous thing he could think of: he set the vessel down carefully on the deck, and rolled it away toward the boat's bow. It rolled back and forth in a snakelike pattern as the boat rocked wildly from side to side, abandoned by its rudderman.

"What in the Gods' names are you doing?" Master Tattannu screamed at him, spittle flying from his beard. "Finish it!"

At that moment, Zaidu locked eyes with the king, and all was known.

The king's eyes widened with rage. "Seize them!" he shrieked to his guards, who pushed through the thrashing crowd, grabbing hold of Master Tattannu and forcing their way to Zaidu.

The vessel rolled to the left, then to the right—then the boat bucked, and the vessel reversed course and rolled straight toward Master Tattannu, who caught it with his foot—lifted it to his chest—produced tinder from a fold of his cloak—struck a spark and lit the fuse—and hurled the vessel to the sky.

Zaidu wouldn't have believed the master had so much strength in his body. He watched, as if in a dream, as the lit vessel rose upward toward the heavens, its speed slowing at an ever-increasing rate. At last it reached its peak, stopped, and plunged back toward Earth, its speed growing ever more quickly.

He had the briefest moment to think: *I was right!*

The vessel exploded against the boat's railing, spilling half its viscid flame into the river, spraying half across the side of the boat. A blaze leaped up from the wood, roaring like thunder, lashing Zaidu's face with tongues of heat.

Everyone was screaming now, leaping overboard, splashing into the river, swimming back toward the banks or foundering wildly amid the waves, howling for help.

Zaidu leaped, too. He hit the water with a splash, felt its coolness envelop him; then burst from the surface amid the smoke and timber, swimming frantically from the collapsing wreckage of the boat, which sank slowly amid roiling smoke and coruscating flame.

He had nowhere to go. No one to return to. No hope of safety. But he swam for the shore anyway, because there was nothing else to be done.



“FOR THE ATTEMPTED murder of the king,” the priest recited, “by a man of the laboring class, the ancient Law Code of King Ammurapi of Babili prescribes no specific punishment.”

Zaidu gazed up at the man who recited the charges against him: young, scarcely older than he was, swathed in a long robe of deep blue trimmed in gold tassel, with an undergarment of white linen, and a breastplate of polished bronze set with neat rows of emeralds and carnelian and agate. The young priest’s beard was long and stringy, like that of a goat, and he wore it awkwardly. He tried to speak in a booming voice, but it cracked on the high notes.

“But it is decreed,” the priest droned on, “in the ancient Shuméru law code of Én Ur-Nammu of Urim, and in the still more venerable code of Énsi Iri’iningina of Lagash, that the penalty for this crime shall be death.”

Zaidu barely heard the words. In the hours since he’d escaped the boat, he’d felt he scarcely existed in the world. He’d

hurried to Arwia's tavern, but she was nowhere to be found. He'd paced the streets like a madman, knowing nowhere he could hide; nowhere they wouldn't expect him and root him out in minutes.

In the end, he strode out onto the Processional Way, amid the potholes and piles of trash, and the weeds sprouting up through cracks in the ancient tiled flagstone. He stepped across the drainage channel clogged with reeking fly-swarmed sewage. Along the moss-grown walls on his left and right marched great bulls and roaring lions and long-necked dragons in relief, once painted proud gold and emerald green against a background that had gleamed bright blue; the glaze now cracked and faded in the sun. He stood among the ruins and waited for them to come.

The Elline soldiers arrived in minutes—alerted, no doubt, by the women who watched from high apartment balconies for anything suspicious—tied his hands behind his back, and marched him straight to a tiny brick shack near the soldiers' barracks, where he spent a long, sleepless night.

Now he stood before the king and a small crowd of nobles in robes of purple and emerald and crimson, who looked down on him from cracked stone benches. The morning sun was in his eyes, but he could see that the king looked most regal of all, in a loose silk gown as blue as the sky, embroidered with intricate golden vines and flowers. Atop his head sat the tiered crown of Babili, its rim adorned with every kind of precious stone. It looked heavy and hot.

"The choice of the manner of death, however," the priest continued, "is left to the intended victim—in this case, the king Seleukos Nikator."

A long silence hung over the square.

"What manner of death," the priest asked at last, "do you decree for this criminal, Supreme Majesty?"

The old king shook his head sadly.

"Was it really necessary to kill an old man?" he asked Zaidu, his voice resonating with surprising strength across the morn-

ing air. "What can I do to Babili that has not already been done to her, in this century and in twenty others?"

Zaidu licked his lips. "No," he called up to the king. "It was not necessary. And there is nothing you can do to me, or to Babili, that has not been done already."

The king nodded, as if in approval.

"If I had your master here before me now," said the king, "the man who lit the vessel and would have burned me and my family alive, had my men not carried me to safety—I would have him crucified and burned."

The priest opened his mouth to declare the punishment, but the king raised a hand to cut him off.

"But I am not convinced that was your aim, boy," he said. "You did not light the vessel. Why not?"

Zaidu tried to swallow, but only clenched his dry throat. "I saw there was no point," he said. "In killing you."

"No point." The king nodded again. "In that case, why did you not warn me?"

"Because there was no point," Zaidu said, "in trying to stop it."

The king's face hardened. "And it is for that, young scribe," he said, "you will die." He turned to the priest. "Make it quick," he said. "A blade to the throat."

The priest nodded. "Beheading!" he cried.

"Not beheading, damn you!" cried the king. "This isn't a bloody spectacle. Slit his throat and be done with it."

The priest backed away, glaring at Zaidu as he departed. "As the king commands," he said.

Two soldiers forced Zaidu to his knees on the hard stone. He did not resist.

He lifted his head. There, at the upper edge of the stands, stood Arwia. She was too far away to see clearly, but he could tell she was crying. What was there to say, now? In all the thousands of years of poetry he'd learned, he knew no words that would make sense of this.

He settled for five simple ones: "Be done with it, then."

A hand gripped his hair and jerked his head back. Something cool and sharp pressed against the skin of his neck. Sharp, cold pain lanced beneath his chin. Warm wetness spread downward onto his chest.

As the darkness crept in from the edges of his vision, it was not Arwia he thought of, nor the king, or even Babili. He thought instead of the movements of stars and Gods, and of earthly kingdoms. And he thought: *The faster one rises, the faster one falls. Every act produces its own opposite.*

Then the darkness swept inward, and all was at an end.

